



HOME (/)
ABOUT
JOURNAL (/ABOUT)
SUBSCRIBE (/SUBSCRIBE)
MASTHEAD (/NEW-PAGE)
PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS (/PROSPECTIVE-MEMBERS)
STAFF RESOURCES (/STAFF-RESOURCES)

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PUBLICATIONS
PUBLICATION ARCHIVE (/PUBLICATION-ARCHIVE)
VOLUME 1 (2009) (/VOLUME-1-2009-2009)
VOLUME 2 (2010) (/VOLUME-2-2009-2010)
VOLUME 3 (2011) (/VOLUME-3-2010-2011)
VOLUME 4 (2012) (/VOLUME-4-2011-2012)
VOLUME 5 (2013) (/VOLUME-5-2012-2013)
VOLUME 6 (2014) (/VOLUME-6-2013-2014)
VOLUME 7 (2015) (/VOLUME-7-2014-2015)
VOLUME 8 (2016) (/VOLUME-8-2015-2016)
VOLUME 9 (2017) (/VOLUME-9-2016-2017)
VOLUME 10 (2018) (/VOLUME-10-2018)
VOLUME 11 (2019) (/VOLUME-11-2019)
SYMPOSIUM
INFORMATION (/SYMPOSIUM)
SYMPOSIUM MATERIALS (/SYMPOSIUMMATERIALS2020)
CLE CREDIT INFORMATION (/CLE)
PREVIOUS SYMPOSIUMS (/PREVIOUSSYMPOSIUMS)
BLOG
FULL BLOG (/FULL-BLOG)
BLOG ARCHIVE (/BLOG-ARCHIVE-1)
PODCASTS
ABOUT THE SHOW (/NEW-PAGE-65)
EPISODES (/EPISODES)

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL: THE ELK TOURISM INDUSTRY IN KENTUCKY

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BY: BRENT M. HOUSE

In 1997, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources began the Kentucky elk restoration project.[i] From 1997-2002, Fish and Wildlife released 1,541 elk from herds in six western states.[ii] The Kentucky elk restoration program is the most successful elk reestablishment program in the country.[iii] The program encompasses 16 counties in Eastern Kentucky and covers a massive 3.5 million-acre area.[iv]

Kentucky's elk population is thriving at the moment.[v] Elk in Kentucky have a 90 percent breeding success rate, a 92 percent calf survival rate, are 15 percent larger than western elk and develop larger antlers.[vi] This is largely due to Kentucky's relatively mild winters and abundant food sources.[vii] Due to these factors, the elk population in Kentucky is likely to continue growing and expanding its range.[viii]



Credit: <https://www.grandviewoutdoors.com/bowhunting/fair-chase-400-inch-bull-elk-kentucky>

The success of Kentucky's elk restoration program has led to economic opportunities in a variety of ways. The map of the elk restoration zone reveals that it is most prevalent in some of Kentucky's most impoverished counties.[ix] In 2015, nearly 70,000 people applied for the lottery to be selected for an elk permit in Kentucky.[x] At the price of \$10 per applicant, this has become a significant source of income for Fish and Wildlife.[xi] Fish and Wildlife estimated that the total economic impact for Kentucky elk hunting was \$5,683,642 in 2014 and \$6,538,500 in 2013 with most of this benefitting the areas within the elk restoration zone.[xii]

While this is a huge economic boost for the region, more can still be done. Many counties within the elk restoration area have taken steps to promote elk-centered tourism, such as Knott County declaring itself the Elk Capital of Kentucky.[xiii] Despite modest efforts, there has been little growth in this type of tourism. 47 million people live within a half-day's drive of the Kentucky elk restoration zone.[xiv] Kentucky has the unique opportunity to market elk-viewing tours of the largest herd in the Eastern United States.

For the time being, land ownership poses a major problem for this type of tourism.[xv] Due to private land ownership, only 13% of the land in the elk restoration zone is available for elk-related tourism activities.[xvi] After establishing an elk herd in an area of the Great Smoky Mountains

National Park, the park saw a 100% increase in visitors, and the Elk Country Visitor Center in Benezette, Pennsylvania welcomed 411,000 elk in 2014, proving that elk-tourism is certainly in demand in the eastern part of the country.[xvii]

Kentucky has an opportunity to increase its tourism and help the counties that are struggling the most by promoting the elk-tourism industry. Currently, only two Kentucky State Parks and a handful of private companies offer elk tours.[xviii] There is little to suggest, however, that this is making a major economic impact in the area.[xix] Establishing a state park and wildlife refuge solely devoted to elk management viewing would provide a much-needed economic boost for counties in the elk restoration zone. Similarly, a cooperative effort between private landowners and the state government would do the same. Since the introduction of elk in Kentucky, there has been nothing to suggest that private business alone can kickstart this process.[xx] Visitors looking for elk need a guarantee that land ownership issues will not hamper their mission to see these beautiful animals in the wild. An entire industry is ready to be formed in Eastern Kentucky, but it will require a nudge from the state government to fully take off.

Tourism efforts centered around Kentucky's elk population will do more than just bring in revenue from viewing tours. It will bring revenue to local communities, businesses, and provide jobs to individuals that need them. People will be persuaded to visit Kentucky over other popular hiking and nature tourism destinations. This will create the need for businesses beyond the obvious to support the needs of elk-motivated visitors to the state. Most importantly, it will give Eastern Kentucky a chance to establish a healthy tourism industry based on its natural beauty and unique resources – the largest elk herd in the Eastern United States.

Promoting elk-tourism will be beneficial to hunters, nature enthusiasts, and Kentuckians in general. A larger state park and wildlife refuge for elk would lead to better management of Kentucky's elk population, a healthier herd, and a greater opportunity to create a new industry in Eastern Kentucky. Anyone who has visited Eastern Kentucky recognizes its natural beauty and untapped potential as a vacation destination. It is time we stop undervaluing natural beauty as a resource and capitalize on it by preserving it.

[i] *2015-2030 Kentucky Elk Management Plan*, KDFWR, <https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Documents/20152030ElkManagementPlan.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/YHT5-BQ68>] (last visited Feb. 17, 2020).

[ii] *Id.*

[iii] *Ky. Elk Population Focus of Upcoming Meeting*, Courier J. (Dec. 10, 2016, 12:20 PM), <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/outdoors/2016/12/10/ky-elk-population-focus-upcoming-meeting/95256756> [<https://perma.cc/C2LM-RR2M>].

[iv] *Id.*

[v] Art Lander, *Art Lander's Outdoors: With Elk Restoration in Kentucky Completed, Harvest Management Begins*, N. Ky. Tribune (Apr. 27, 2018), <https://www.nkytribune.com/2018/04/art-landers-outdoors-with-elk-restoration-in-kentucky-completed-harvest-management-begins/> [<https://perma.cc/9N4F-74EW>].

[vi] *Id.*

[vii] *Id.*

[viii] *Id.*

[ix] Bill Estep, 'Not Enough Jobs.' *Nine of the 30 Poorest Counties in U.S. are in Eastern Kentucky*, Lexington Harold Leader (Dec. 3, 2017, 11:45 AM), <https://www.kentucky.com/news/state/article187823434.html>.

[x] Lander, *supra* note [v].

[xi] *Id.*

[xii] *Supra* note [i].

[xiii] *Id.*

[xiv] *Id.*

[xv] *Id.*

[xvi] *Id.*

[xvii] *Supra* note [i].

[xviii] *Id.*

[xix] *Id.*

[xx] *Id.*

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40508 (859) 257-4747 BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM (MAILTO:BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM)

